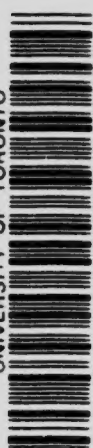


Memorabilia

TWELVE SCENES FROM
THE LIFE OF CHRIST
BY Duccio di Buoninsegna
WITH AN INTRODUCTION &
NOTES BY G. F. HILL

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

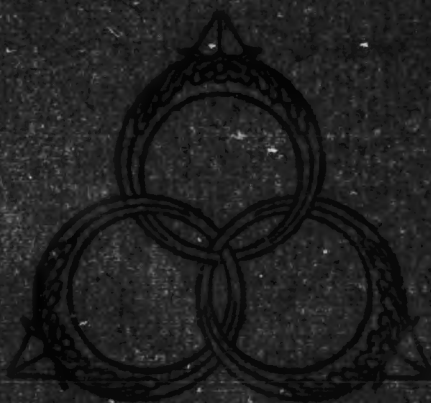


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WITH INTRODUCTION & NOTES
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INTRODUCTION

FOR which reason this work was so great a marvel among the people of that time, nothing better than it having been seen heretofore, that it was carried from the house of Cimabue to the Church with much festivity, to the sound of trumpets, in most solemn procession, and he was greatly rewarded and honoured therefor.'

Vasari, in this well-known passage, tells of Cimabue and the Madonna, which now hangs in the Rucellai chapel in S. Maria Novella, a story which a Sieneſe chronicle and certain contemporary documents relate of Duccio the ſon of Buoninſegna and the great altar-piece from which our illustrations are taken. Much has been written about the Rucellai Madonna, but fortunately we are not concerned here with the higher criticism of Italian Art. All the critics do not yet admit that the Madonna which Vasari ſays Cimabue painted is really the work of Duccio; but about the great altar-piece, the *Majestas*, at Siena, there is fortunately no doubt.

TWELVE SCENES FROM

Duccio—who was already in public employ at Siena in 1278, when Giotto was probably a little boy—must have been something over fifty when in 1308 he began work on his masterpiece. In 1311 it was finished, and on the 9th of June a public holiday was proclaimed. 'The shops were shut; and the bishop ordered a great and devout company of priests and friars with a solemn procession, accompanied by the Nine Signori and by all the officials of the Commune and all the people; and all the more worthy were ranged in order near the said picture with lighted candles in their hands; and then behind them were the women and children, very devout. And they accompanied the said picture as far as the Cathedral, making the procession around the Campo after the usual manner, ringing all the joy-bells for devotion to so noble a picture as this is. . . . And all that day was spent in prayer with much giving of alms to poor persons, praying to God and His Mother, who is our advocate,' etc.

The Madonna delle Grazie, to whom the Sienese had attributed the victory of Montaperti and paid especial honour, was removed to a side altar to make room for the new altar-piece, which itself, in 1506, had to give place to something else. It was painted on two sides. The greater part of that which looked towards the nave was occupied by the chief design of the

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Virgin and Child and saints and angels, with a row of ten small half-figures of Apostles arranged as it were in a gallery along the top. Above this, in triangular pediments between pinnacles, were scenes from the life of the Virgin. Below the main piece was the predella, a row of seven small pictures of the life of Christ, divided by figures of the prophets. At the back, looking towards the choir, there were no less than thirty-four scenes, as well as a predella of seven others, continuing and completing the life of Christ. After the picture was taken down from the high altar, it was sawn in two in its thickness, and now we may see it in the Opera del Duomo, or at least so much of it as remains in Siena. For in the course of its history some parts of it went astray, as Italian pictures will do, and have found resting places in England and Germany. The Coronation of the Virgin, which was above in the pediment on the front, has disappeared; but the Annunciation is in the National Gallery, which also possesses two other subjects. These, with Mr. R. H. Benson's four scenes, apparently all came from the predelle, although there seems to be some doubt as to the position of the Transfiguration. To the front predella, also, belongs the Nativity with its two flanking prophets, Isaiah and Ezekiel, now at Berlin. Two of the panels from the pediments on the choir-side

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have disappeared. Thus all the great *ancona* is still in existence except three panels. Sadly knocked about as it appears when we see it now, it has fared better than, knowing the history of Italian pictures, one could have hoped for a piece of a structure so complicated, and so easy and tempting to dismember.

Besides being the one definitely and indisputably 'documented' work of Duccio, the *Majestas* is as indisputably his greatest extant work; for we know of no other panel-painting of the same period that has any claim to be mentioned beside it. With it, Sienese painting is lifted as definitely out of the Byzantine tradition as Italian sculpture is revived by Nicolò Pisano and his school. Both artists are largely dependent, for the foundations of their art, on the old models and traditions, Duccio on his manuscripts or paintings in the 'Byzantine manner' as Nicolò on his late Roman sarcophagi. It is strange how the founders of new movements in art have a way of finding their inspiration in the most debased models; Vergil owes more to Apollonius of Rhodes than to Homer, if we analyse his literary sources. The point to remember is that the products of these innovators are so much more than mere imitations of their models that it is with surprise we notice that they are imitations; what gives them their interest and value

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is the evidence that the new spirit is striving to express itself with the help of the old ungainly forms. Italy had developed the 'Byzantine manner' out of a mixture of true Byzantine and Western elements; but it seemed always to be working with its eyes on Byzantium. These innovators look forward, not merely backward along a distant tradition. Thus if you think, at first sight, that the scenes on Duccio's *Majestas* are merely magnified illuminations, on closer examination you will find that they reveal a study of nature in details, if not always in composition, of which even the best hieratic illumination of the ages preceding him betrays no sign; and in some scenes, like his *Crucifixion*, the world seems suddenly to have come to life again. It is true that they but seldom have the large style and the grand manner which are essential to the greatest art. Not merely the scale, but the style is small.

Again, were it not for his admirable colouring, the absence of the power of giving relief to his figures would be much more obvious than it is. It is possible that had Duccio attempted fresco painting—but why speculate? Giotto came, in Florence, and supplied the qualities that Duccio lacks, and to which, to judge by his successors in Siena, something in the Siennese temperament was not friendly. Siena produced one painter

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and one sculptor of the first rank, discoverers of great truths which were worked out not by their own schools, but in neighbouring Florence. In the case of Jacopo della Quercia, it is possible to point to definite traces of his influence on the greatest of all Florentine sculptors; but Duccio's influence is more difficult to define, though we may surmise that even Giotto may have learned something from him. However that may be, he is the first and greatest of Sienese painters, the founder of that school which, in its qualities of grace and brightness, stands to the robust Florentine art in somewhat the same relation as Ionian to Attic sculpture.

PLATES

1. The Temptation.
2. The Calling of St. Peter and St. Andrew.
3. Christ and the Woman of Samaria.
4. The Transfiguration.
5. The Healing of the Man born Blind.
6. The Raising of Lazarus.
7. Judas agrees to betray Christ.
8. Peter denying Christ.
9. The Crucifixion.
10. The Harrowing of Hell.
11. The Three Maries at the Tomb.
12. Noli Me Tangere.

Of the above Numbers 1, 2, 3 and 6 are reproduced by permission of Mr. R. H. Benson; 4 and 5 are from the National Gallery, London; and 7 to 12 from the Opera del Duomo, Siena.

1. THE TEMPTATION. Collection of Mr.
R. H. Benson.

If we wish to see the advance of the early fourteenth century over the Byzantine manner, we should compare this picture with the same subject in such a typical Byzantine work as the early twelfth-century Psalter of Queen Melisanda. The same elements are present; but there they are arranged mechanically, according to formula. Duccio has re-arranged them, given them individual life and dramatic relation to each other. The inventive fancy of the new spirit shows itself also in the 'cities of the world,' with their delightful mixture of Romanesque and Gothic features. Part of the other scene of the Temptation, on the Temple, is also preserved. Whether Duccio also represented the first scene, in the wilderness, is uncertain.



2. THE CALLING OF ST. PETER AND
ST. ANDREW. Collection of Mr. R. H.
Benson.

Gesture, expression, and composition in this picture are more conventional and in accordance with the Byzantine scheme than in the preceding. The subject was in itself less dramatic, which may account for Duccio's failure to modernize it.



3. CHRIST AND THE WOMAN OF SAMARIA. Collection of Mr. R. H. Benson.

Here again the group of the two chief actors shows little that is new in composition or gesture. But, though the disciples also appear in the earlier renderings of the scene, a new note is struck in these four figures emerging from the city gate. They are types that recur constantly in these pictures; but though they are types, the impression of a group of individually interested spectators is conveyed in a very striking manner. If Duccio treats the main subject more or less according to tradition, he lets himself go in the surroundings.



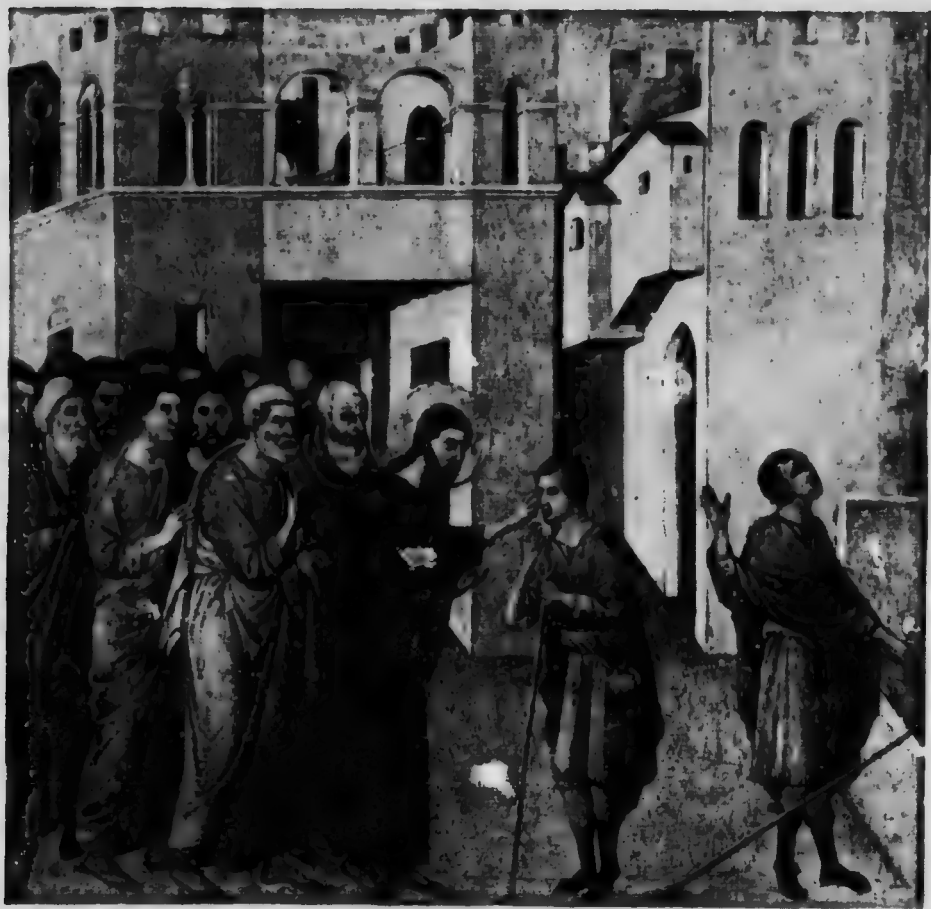
4. THE TRANSFIGURATION. National Gallery, London.

In this picture practically nothing has been altered of the scheme of the Byzantine school, save that the mandorla surrounding the central figure is absent, and the central apostle is in a less exaggerated position of astonishment than usual. But it is a subject in which Duccio must have felt that a severe symmetry was more imposing than any attempt at a more 'natural' arrangement. The figure of Christ is of extraordinarily solemn dignity. The picture as a whole is a fine example of Duccio's luminous glow, rather than brilliancy, of colour.



5. THE HEALING OF THE MAN BORN BLIND. National Gallery, London.

The crowd in this picture is less successful than the four figures in the Woman of Samaria. But the timid hesitancy of the blind youth is admirably expressed. The architecture, too, is rendered with more truth, and with better sense of its relation to the figures, than had ever been done before. On the right the second stage of the story is indicated; the blind man has washed in the fountain and regained his sight.



6. THE RAISING OF LAZARUS. Collection of Mr. R. H. Benson.

This picture is extraordinarily close to the Byzantine scheme, in the more elaborate forms of which the arrangement is just the same, Christ being separated from the corpse, which stands upright in a rock tomb, by the interposition of one or both of Lazarus' sisters kneeling, and by some of the crowd. What strikes one in this picture is the extreme liveliness of the expression of the corpse. Naturalism at this time had certain very definite limits.



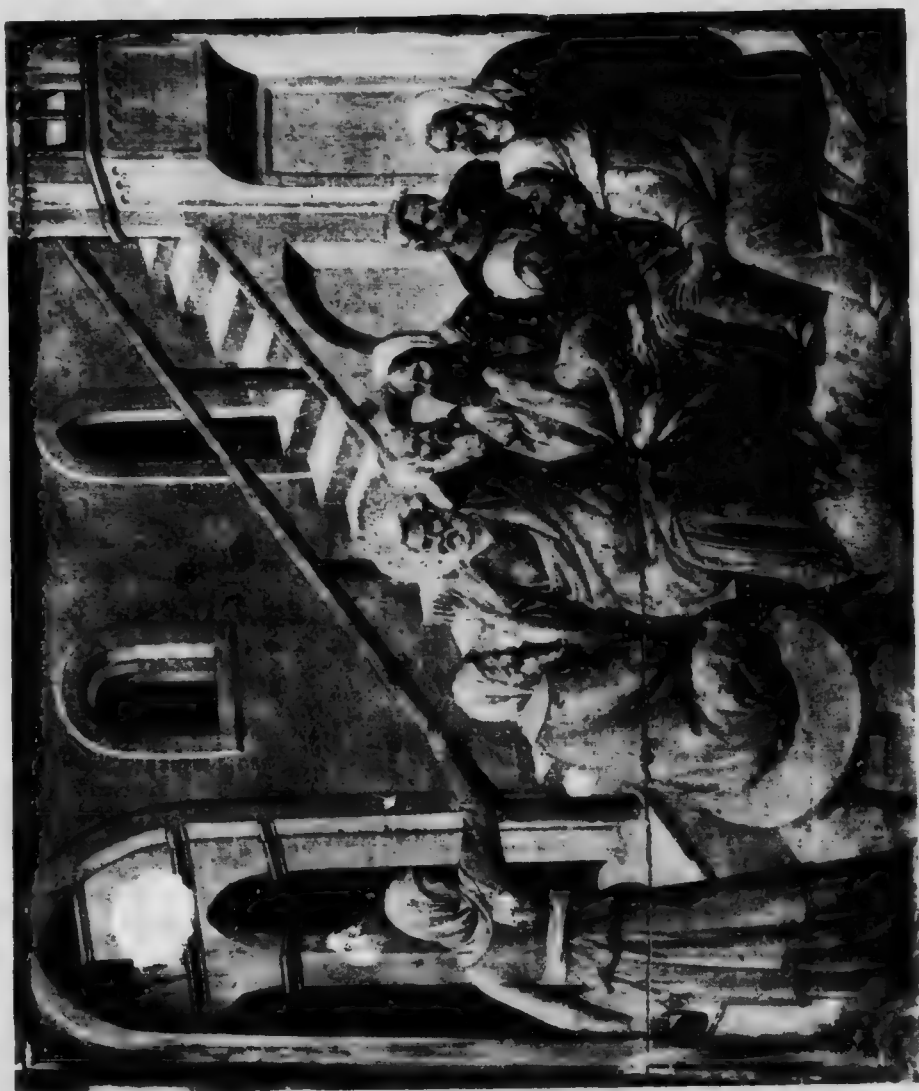
7. JUDAS AGREES TO BETRAY CHRIST.
Opera del Duomo, Siena.

The scene here shown is so rare in representations of the Life of Christ that Weigelt, the author of the most learned and exhaustive study of Duccio, is obliged to confess that he has found no example either in the works of the 'Byzantine manner,' or in true Byzantine art. Barna of Siena followed Duccio in his fresco in the Collegiata at S. Gimignano; but an independent (though very similar) rendering is found on a French Gothic ivory diptych of the late thirteenth century at Berlin. Even at a later period the subject is rare; a French fourteenth-century ivory panel in openwork in the British Museum has it as one of nine scenes of the Passion.



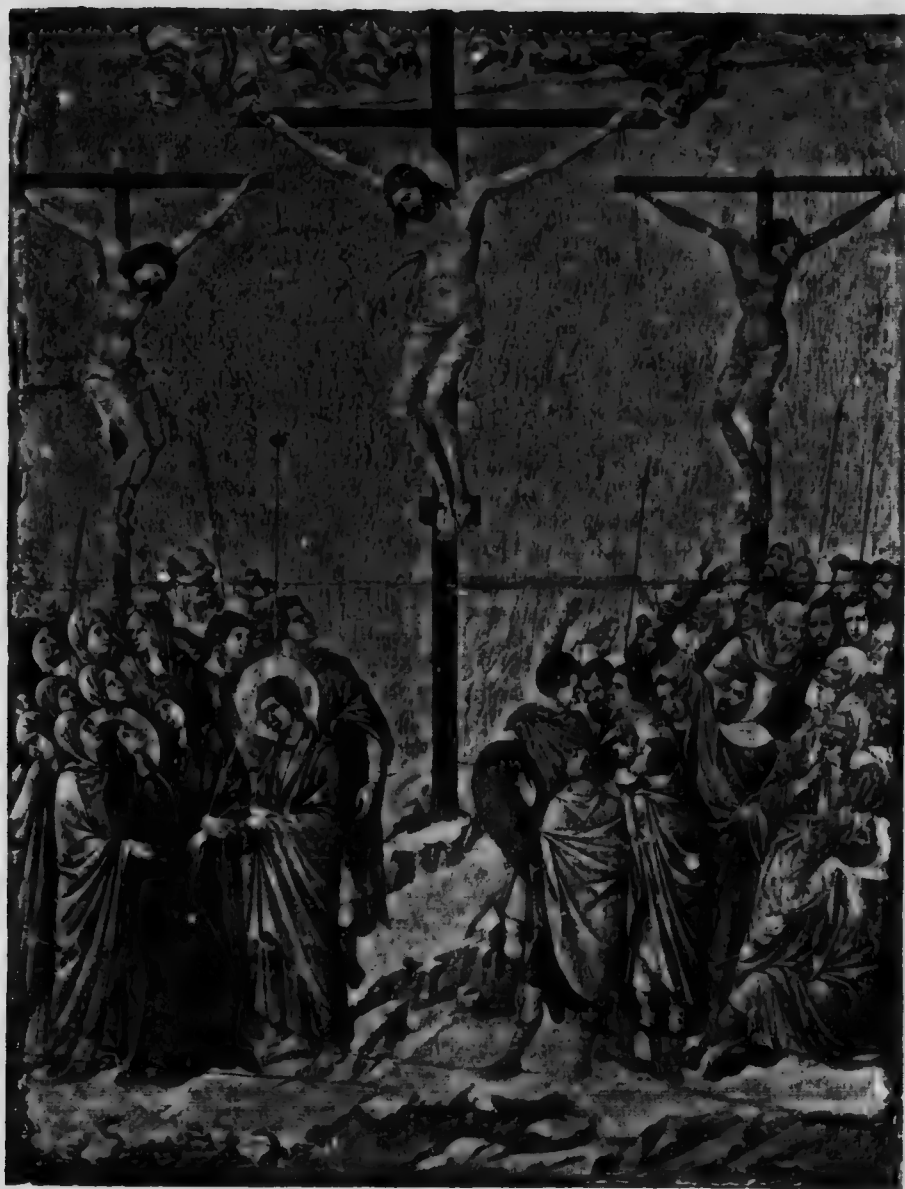
**8. PETER DENYING CHRIST. Opera del
Duomo, Siena.**

The group seated round the fire, the maid-servant pausing to accuse Peter, are extraordinarily modern in pose and effect. The architecture, for all its faulty perspective, is finely composed as a background; and the picture is perhaps the most remarkable, certainly one of the most effective, of all the scenes of the altar-piece.



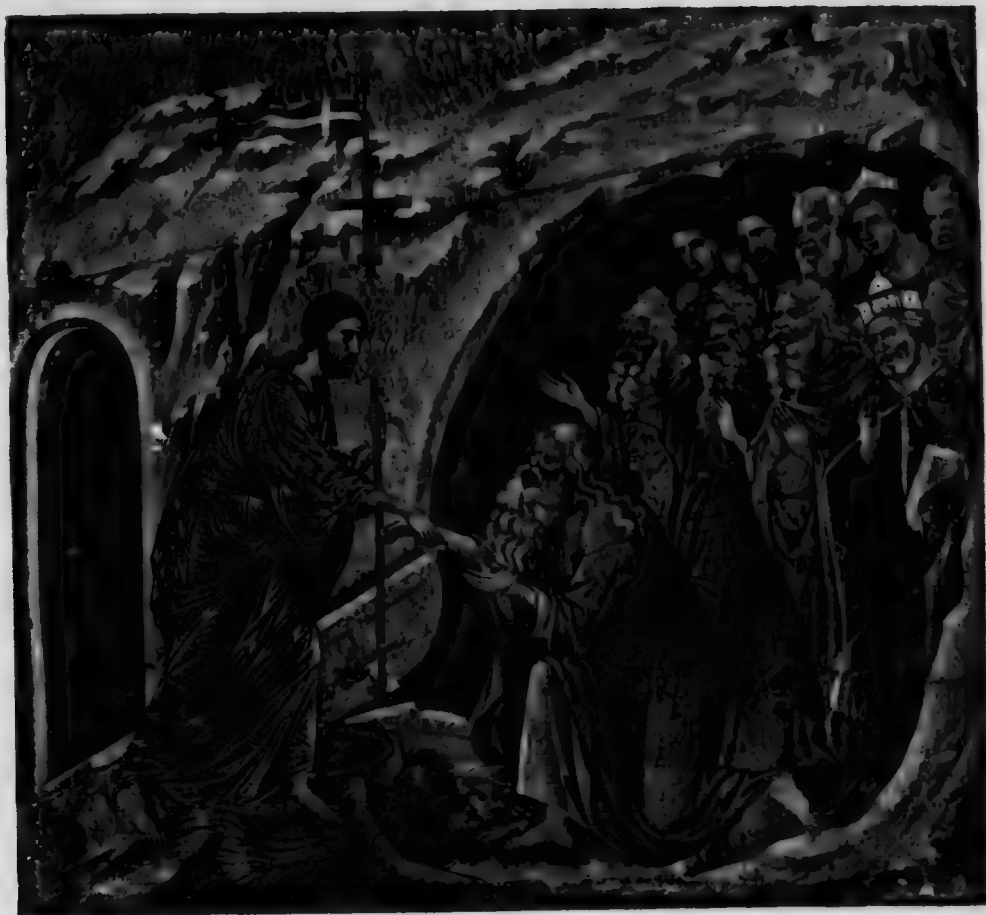
9. **THE CRUCIFIXION.** Opera del Duomo,
Siena.

There is nothing of the Byzantine scheme in this picture, with its two crowds, the one of sorrowful disciples around the fainting Virgin, the other of agitated spectators; it is a twelfth-century type, developed in Italy. The treatment of the nude, which shows remarkable anatomical knowledge for its time, is on the other hand not like anything to be found among Duccio's mediaeval predecessors.



**10. THE HARROWING OF HELL. Opera
del Duomo, Siena.**

Duccio follows the Eastern tradition in representing this subject instead of the Resurrection; he follows it, too, in showing the door of Hell as a cavern, not as the jaws of a monster. But instead of the conventional figure of Hades he has substituted a hairy, winged Devil.



II. THE THREE MARIES AT THE TOMB.

Opera del Duomo, Siena.

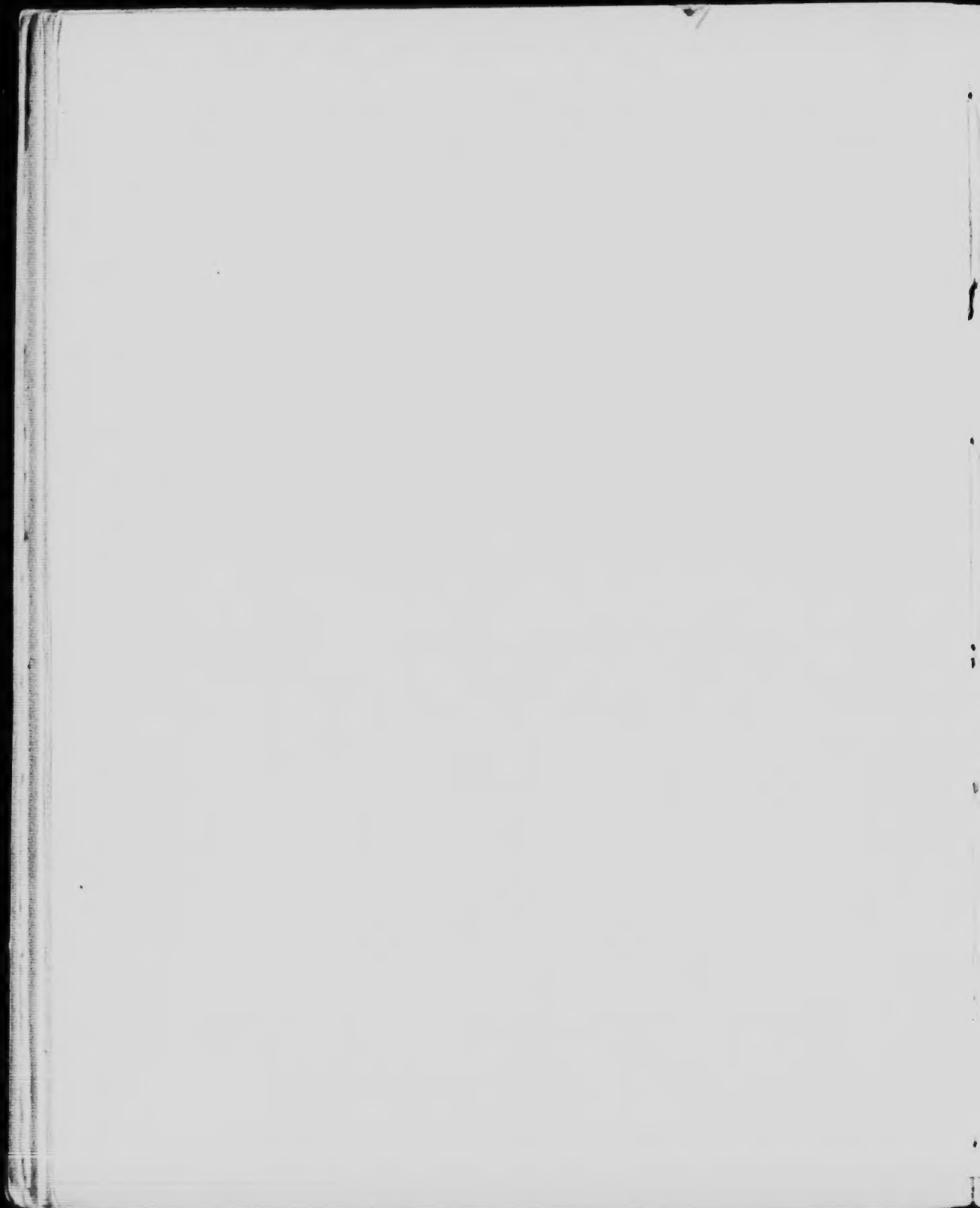
This again is one of the simpler scenes, on the Byzantine scheme, with few but dignified figures, in which the effect is gained by broad areas of luminous colour, and the solemn mass of the mountains detached against the gold ground.



**12. NOLI ME TANGERE. Opera del Duomo,
Siena.**

There is no rendering in the whole history of art which conveys more directly than this the pathos of the subject. It is fair to say, however, that the intense yearning of the Magdalen, the noble compassion of her Master, have not appealed to the most famous of our historians of art, who write: 'The Redeemer with the triple cross and banner, erect and colossal . . . is only worthy of attention for a new effort to produce ready action. The vehemence of the early period is still marked in the Magdalen, whose expression is more of grief than longing.' The figure of Christ, be it noted, is neither here nor in the Harrowing of Hell of more than human proportions.





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